

Testimony for Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support

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By

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Introduction

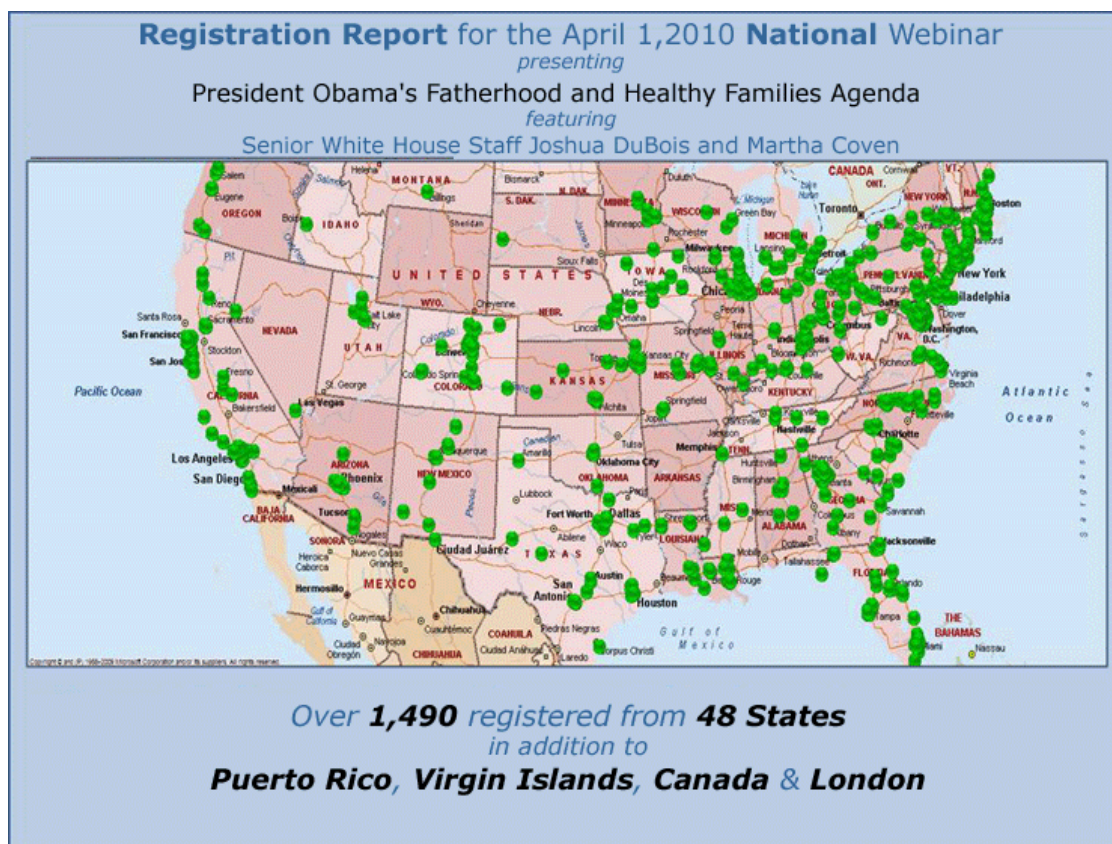
Happy Fathers Day!

My name is Kirk Harris. I am the facilitator for the National Fatherhood Leaders Group (NFLG). NFLG is a consortium of the nation's leading fatherhood organizations and affiliated organizations. I would like to thank the committee for the invitation and offer my profuse appreciation for the committee's leadership in promoting this most critical issue of fatherhood. In the U.S., twenty-five million children live apart from their fathers. There has been no greater opportunity in American history to promote the issue of fatherhood than now. We have a growing public awareness of the importance of fathers as essential assets to children, families and community. We have a president who has a tremendous appreciation for the central role that men can play in supporting a myriad of positive outcomes for their children. The President's proposal to establish a Fatherhood, Marriage and Families Innovation demonstrates leadership in the promotion of strong children and families. The Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act (HR2979) championed by Congressman Danny Davis represents another public policy opportunity that assists fathers in meeting their financial, emotional and nurturing obligations to their children and families. The confluence of these opportunities should not be taken lightly. I believe that the confluence of these opportunities represents a paradigm shift in social policy that more readily embraces fathers as co-equal partners in raising healthy, happy and well-adjusted children.

Networks of Providers

I would like to recognize the community fathers who are with us today. These fathers come from the Center for Urban Families. The Center for Urban Families operates a nationally recognized fatherhood program in Baltimore, Maryland. Mr. Joe Jones is President/CEO of the Center for Urban Families and is also Chairman of the National Fatherhood Leaders Group.

We also know that there's a tremendous network of individuals and programs quietly toiling in support of fatherhood issues. In fact, on April 1st of this year NFLG held a webinar to discuss the emerging national public policy environment in support of fatherhood. NFLG hosted approximately 1500 participants from 48 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands on the Webinar. Those fatherhood stakeholders participating in the Webinar represent only a portion of the network of programs and individuals promoting fatherhood at the local and state level. These programs have grown out of maternal and child health organizations, are operating in Head-Start agencies, have shown up in church basements, and have taken root in various grassroots and community-based settings. Fathering programs have also take the form of diversion programs such as “fathering courts.” Fathering programs might focus on specific segments of the fatherhood population, such as military fathers. Finally, fatherhood efforts may emerge as local or state initiatives with a commission and/or a study panel operating to advance supportive practices and policies on behalf of fathers.



Fatherhood Program History: PRWORA and DRA

As important as we say both parents are with respect to the development and nurturing of children, in large measure social welfare policy has placed fathers outside of the definition of family for purposes of service delivery and social supports. The brief history of the public funding of fatherhood programs has been episodic, marked by ambivalence on one hand and a lack of clarity about program objectives on the other.

Clinton Era

During the Clinton administration, the growing out of wedlock birth rate, as well as attending concerns related to the growth of the welfare rolls, placed fatherhood and the father's personal responsibility to his child as a central feature of the Clinton administration's social welfare policy agenda. President Clinton issued an administrative order that directed federal agencies to examine their practices, policies and support for fatherhood issues. Vice president Gore also established the Father to Father initiative that sought to identify and engage fathers and fatherhood practitioners from across the country in support of President Clinton's fatherhood agenda. But the most sweeping change that came under President Clinton was the enactment of Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) that changed welfare as we knew it.

For mothers, PRWORA established time-limited benefits and sought to move those mothers from the welfare rolls to work with laser-like focus.

For fathers, PRWORA aggressively focused on paternity establishment, child support payment enforcement, and work. The growing importance of fatherhood took on a national scope. Fatherhood programs began to develop to assist fathers in their efforts to be more financially responsible and physically and emotionally engaged with their children. As those programs progressed, they uncovered some very important information about the population they served. It was discovered that:

- Low-income fathers from a socio-economic perspective don't look any different than low-income mothers, with a big distinction being that fathers are for the most part are not recipients of social welfare supports and services.

- Low-income fathers typically do not have the ability to navigate the often complex and punitive child support system that demands them to be economically responsible for their children, but does not help them realize their financial, social, emotional and nurturing responsibilities.
- The punitive nature of child support enforcement created disincentives for men to engage the system and often drove fathers underground, thus lessening the likelihood of their physical, emotional, and nurturing connection with their children.
- Limited skills, education and job availability have inhibited low-income fathers in their efforts to successfully carryout their responsibilities because of their inability to gain a financial foothold, which is the threshold they must cross in order to realize their full capacity as a “responsible father.” These fathers were “dead broke not deadbeat”!

The public funding environment for fatherhood programming during the Clinton administration was essentially non-existent. Efforts were made to make the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program under PRWORA, flexible enough to accommodate support for fatherhood related activities. But, entrenched local practices and less than enthusiastic receptivity by agencies that traditionally served mothers and children offered significant obstacles to the creative funding of fatherhood activities under TANF during the Clinton Administration. President Clinton and the 104th Congress proposed fatherhood legislation that would provide public funding for fatherhood programs, but that legislation never passed. The main source of funding for fatherhood programming during the Clinton administration was through private philanthropy, and by the end of the 1990s to the beginning of the new millennium, private foundation funding for fatherhood programs had tapered off considerably.

Bush Era

President Bush revisited the issue of fatherhood during the course of his administration with a concern related to the growth of out of wedlock births, but with a particular focus on the growing divorce rates and declining marriage rates amongst American citizens. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) reauthorized Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The re-authorized TANF sought to promote some core objectives, including:

- Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies and establish annual numerical goals for preventing and reducing the incidence of these pregnancies.
- Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

DRA also established the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grant Programs that made available \$150 million, with \$100 million for Healthy Marriage and \$50 million for Responsible Fatherhood programming. In the decade and a half prior to DRA, the number of fatherhood programs grew dramatically with the commitment and resources of private donors. Fathering programs under DRA had a different emphasis than those that had emerged under private philanthropic support pre-DRA. The funding of fatherhood programs under DRA offered a unique challenge to the field of fatherhood that had become reasonably well-established and that increasingly shared a common understanding of what was needed in efforts to support a man's responsible fatherhood journey. Of the relatively small number of fatherhood programs that did receive public funding under DRA, many of those programs experienced significant challenges. Some key observations relative to the establishment of fatherhood programming under DRA are as follows:

- Support for pre-DRA Fatherhood programs was given less emphasis, while support for "new" Healthy Marriage and Fatherhood Responsible programs and practitioners were given priority.
- The "new" Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood programs and practitioners in large measure were not connected to the existing and more mature fatherhood field and its practitioners that had been emerging 15 years prior to DRA.
- There was a loss of some of the more experienced fatherhood programs and practitioners because they were not funded under DRA.
- Post-DRA fatherhood programs focused on marriage promotion and couples counseling, with far less emphasis on employment, education and training, and navigation of child support, which had become a growing area of expertise for pre-DRA fatherhood programs.

- There were significant challenges experienced by post-DRA fatherhood programs related to outreach into and participation of populations formerly served by pre-DRA fatherhood program.

Fatherhood Program Support the Economic Stability of Men

Pre-DRA Fatherhood programs have played an important role in helping low-income men become more financially viable so that they can meaningfully support themselves and their children. They do this in a number of ways, including:

1. Offering employment services to assist those experiencing employment barriers
2. Engaging in case management to address physical and mental health issues that could emerge and serve as a barrier to employment
3. Providing referrals to legal service to address driver's license suspension, initiate expungement proceeding or manage child support obligations so that these issues do not become an impediment to employment
4. Providing support to fathers who are making re-entry into the community after incarceration and working with re-entering fathers to ensure that they procure meaningful employment to avoid potential recidivism that would only worsens their employment prospect in the future.
5. Establishing partnerships with child support agencies to build cooperative arrangements that promote and offer incentives for fathers to stay connected to the labor market
6. Supporting the development of peer-to-peer networks that help men address challenges in their lives and the lives of their children such that they do not become a barrier to employment.
7. Helping men identify educational and training opportunities to give them a better foothold in the job market.
8. Cultivating relationships with potential employers that could be a direct source for employment for the men in the program.

8. Addressing issues related to drug and alcohol use that could create a barrier to procuring and holding down a job.
9. Offering anger management sessions that allow men to work on matters related to self-improvement which keeps men committed to their success, thus making it easier for them to retain employment.
10. Offering opportunities for men to acquire better parenting skills, thus contributing to their ability to build stronger relationships with their children, which in turn creates more incentives for men to work.
11. Making provisions for training related to co-parenting, relationship management and/or domestic violence such that fathers are better able to manage their personal relations, which, if not managed, could derail their ability to make an effective transition to the workforce.

Nature of Fatherhood Program Outcomes and Measure

The challenge associated with evaluation and outcomes measure in the fatherhood field is that there are no one-size-fits-all fatherhood programs. Thus, the ability to develop standardized metrics for outcome measures becomes extremely difficult. However, one thing that is certainly clear is that there has been minimal investment in evaluation efforts associated with fatherhood programs. Additionally, there has also been minimal investment in fatherhood program capacity or infrastructure to support effective evaluation practice over time. There have been well-funded “Responsible Fatherhood Demonstrations” projects such as:

1. Young Unwed Fathers Project
2. Parents’ Fair Share
3. Welfare to Work Grants Programs
4. Responsible Fatherhood Program
5. Partners for Fragile Families

All of these programs were subject to extensive evaluation and offered some promising outcomes with respect to fatherhood programming, but the scale and the cost of these

evaluation initiatives are often prohibitive for most fatherhood initiative efforts. Additionally, the support for mixed methods related to evaluation is important because it is both the qualitative and quantitative features of the evaluation that capture the depth of the father-child interaction, in not only describing the fatherhood experience, but in documenting the more instrumental aspects of responsible fatherhood that would include outcomes such as child support payments and employment wages generated.

With the emergence of the President's Innovation Fund proposal and the Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act, there is a new opportunity to look at evidence-based strategies within the fatherhood field, while considering scale and strategic collaborations. Creating a theory of change that interconnects key elements associated with fatherhood practice that have been accepted as a promising practice in the field, is a critical first step in building an intuitive and practice-oriented evaluation model. The elements of this theory of change would include the following:

- Securing education and training to strengthen labor force mobility
- Securing employment
- Payment of child support obligation
- Opportunities to engage and support the emotional and development needs of the child
- Success in navigating parental relationship to improve child outcomes

Finally, I would like to say that when it's all said and done, our public policy with respect to children should be that we do all that we can to involve and strengthen both parents, so that parents can do their best in nurturing, supporting and loving their children.